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The Expenses of a Saint-Louis Marriage -- Origins -- Principal Aspects and Consequences

[Les Frais du Mariage Saint-Louisien -- Origines -- Principaux Aspects et Consequences]

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The native of the large cities of Senegal, one from Saint-Louis in particular, is evolving, but his expenses for ceremonies of "pleasure," baptism and especially marriage, are evolving also, and unhappily much more rapidly. The young man looks for a way to be able to manage this vertiginous soaring of expenses; he struggles, if not to stop it, to curb it at least. Some associations have been formed in order to agree on a fixed sum which one [9] [Fig. 6 appears here] [10] is not to exceed, as for the expenses of marriage. They scarcely seem to give the anticipated result, their members not facing up to the strength of character required for the attacks, with innovation as the object. Nevertheless, one should cite the nearly general agreement of the members on the precept to "defy the tempest" and to pay no attention to the desires of their parents, parents-in-law, and spouses for having pompous nuptials. Those among them who do not feel capable of restraining their vanity by acting "poverty-stricken" avail themselves of the facilities that they have for changing posts and contracting bush marriages (1). Most of them

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1. For the men and women of Saint-Louis, any woman who does not live in Saint-Louis or has no ancestors in this city is from the bush and hence is of mundane breeding and an inadequate housekeeper.

remain single.

What is the origin of these high expenses? We are going to look for it in the local customs, without any expectation of finding it in former times or in the laws of the Koran, which we have merely submitted to, and which in any case we are trying to adapt to our fancy. What are the phases of marriage? What expenses does each one require? We shall give them specifically as we consider the single case of a man from Saint-Louis. Saint-Louis is the "center of good taste" for the colony and serves as the model for it. Finally, do these exaggerated expenses have

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Fig. 6. A young lady of fashion from Wolove [Wolof] high society. Artificial coiffure in the latest fashion; jewelry in "Senegal gold" (generally inferior; dress and robe in bright colors; very stately; painted lips (in blue, of course); universal toothpick. Photo. Labitte, I.F.A.N.

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369 581 consequences with regard to celibacy and the orientation of manners and customs? This will be the last part of this too brief sketch.

What is the origin of the expenses?

It is in large part in the social organization of the Senegalese Blacks before the introduction of Islam and before the French peace.

584 Marriage then depended upon the wishes of the fathers and mothers of the spouses. The marriage portion imposed was 583 enormous, even though proportional to the social rank of the fiancé and to his wealth. It was made up of captives and animals. In return, the wife, in order to maintain her dignity in the eyes of the husband and the co-spouses, joined her new residence with often as much wealth as she had received. This per- [582] haps is the origin of the frequent unions between cousins, uncle and niece, aunt and nephew. The purpose of this for the family was to keep its wealth concentrated.

As Moslems, we have introduced the Koran and the Koranic marriage portion, different for a slave and for a free woman, with an assessment proportional to the wealth of the husband, but which is principle requires no costly pomp and which is not preoccupied with griots [singers, poets, storytellers].

With the French peace, the captives have been withdrawn from the exchanges, and the idea of replacing them with gold, money, or animals (now very vulgar property) prevails.

369 584 178 But with freedom the horizon was also widened. The suitors, formerly localized and nearly always known in advance, have multiplied. One originally from the Fouta is quickly transported to Sène and, without bloodshed, without abduction, can marry a girl whom many young men dream of winning. The rivalries, which not long ago were settled on the field of battle or by thrusts of daggers, have perpetuated themselves under the indifferent eyes of the Whites, but on the field of marriage and by thrusts of gold or banknotes (diamalé, rivalry for a woman).

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533 The griots, those "vipers' tongues," have put together new songs in order to make up for the loss of the spoils of war never to be hoped for again. Without exaggeration or error, one
[583] can assert that the very high cost of the marriage expenses is due only to the griots, who, using their malevolent genius, contrast in their chants the generosity of such and such a man with the parsimony of the other, spicing all the praises with references to his always legendary and generous ancestors.

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583 To dazzle the girl and her relatives with his generosity and his wealth, to wrest from the rivals acknowledgment of their poverty, to overwhelm with goods persons of inferior castes whose praises will never cease, to enrich the prestige and the dignity of his parents-in-law -- there is the origin of the enormous expenses which must be faced by those who marry in Saint-Louis.

The phases of Marriage and their cost

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[584] This is not the place to show what role the girl plays in the act which is going to decide her life. Nevertheless, let us be permitted to affirm that today some freedom is permitted the girl in choosing a spouse, always with the condition that her choice must be a man of her rank. Native society is, in effect, compartmented, and the smith, the jeweler, the cobbler, the griot never becomes attached to a guer (2) woman with the

2. All the persons who do not belong to an inferior caste -- griot, cobbler, etc. Not to be confused with gor, free man, who is not a slave or a freed man.

permission of his parents. Conversely, the guer must remain in his domain, and the custom which formerly authorized the
[631] chiefs to contract marriages with caste women, always under the pretense of conquest in battle, is tending to disappear.

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584 So some young persons of the same rank are going to marry. Communication is maintained more or less secretly by neighbor women or more commonly by a caste girl, a friend of the future wife, until the young man is certain of success. Then he goes to make his "attack" with thrusts of banknotes; he must compel his rivals to yield to him. The parents of the girl are not supposed to know about the thousands of francs thus pledged, and the cost is not counted in the expenses of the marriage. When the rivals accept their defeat, the candidate makes his request [11] officially. Otherwise, the attack must continue until it is settled. Then the man announces his candidacy, and the real expenses for his marriage begin.

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583 1. The Varugar. This is the sum that is deposited, with the approval of the parents of the two young people. It is a guarantee for the man that the girl will no longer receive any other candidate, and, for the girl, assurance of being obligatorily supported by the suitor. The amount of the varugar varies: fixed at 2,500 francs at the minimum, it easily reaches 25,000 to 30,000 francs among the "nouveaux riches" of the Black market place.

As the proverb says, however, it is a long way from the cup to the lips, and it is a long way between the varugar and the marriage. Even though the amount due first is within the reach of every purse, the actual expenses of the marriage are enormous, and the man has to set about with the utmost slowness to save what is needed. Need it be added that, faced with following fashion and dressing accordingly, the future spouses devote to that a large part of their earnings? In order to make haste, very often the young man goes on a "campaign" and returns at the end of several years (two to seven) bearing the sum required for the marriage and for the nuptials, the last two phases.

2. The N'dakutar. This is a lump sum of 1,000 francs at least (which sometimes exceeds 5,000 francs), which the suitor gives to the girl in order to be presented to her parents. Accepting the n'dakutar implies for the latter the duty of

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369 584 583 dismissing all present or future suitors. Originally this was an indemnity to be shared among the unhappy rivals, or was intended as reimbursement for the advances collected by the parents of the girl without her knowledge. Some reputedly avaricious families demand it several times.

369 683 3. The Marriage Portion. Its amount does not rigorously follow the fluctuations which characterize the other expenses. It amounts to 2,500 francs and is fixed by a marabout, by converting the heads of cattle of Koranic law into French money. Religious in nature and hence escaping the whims of fashion, its importance is wholly secondary. One can delay five or six years or more before paying it. Many monogamous households get along very well, even though not a sou of the marriage portion [587] has been paid. Payment becomes obligatory, however, when the husband wishes to contract a second marriage.

4. Ngegenay (The Pillow). This is an optional expense, but one that good breeding requires. It consists of leaving under [585] the wife's pillow a sum of money and a quantity of little gifts (perfumes, sandals, bracelets, etc.) the day after the first nuptial contact. It is like a manifestation of the joy that one felt upon finding his wife to be virgin.

5. The Decoration. This is the essence of the Saint-Louis marriage. All of the expenses listed up to here are more or less private, or in any case little known, except for the marriage portion, by the neighboring quarters or the relatives far away from the city. For the Decoration, the payment is preceded by widely disseminated announcements several months in advance. It is exhibited before all the relatives of the married couple, their friends, their acquaintances, before all the persons of inferior castes, who go everywhere and who will repeat what they have seen, in brief, before the city.

Optional in the beginning, it today assumes such an obligatory character that only in Saint-Louis do the instructors dare to avoid it or to minimize its importance. Of what is the Decoration composed? Essentially of a box, a basket for effects, and a basket of small goods, but most especially what one has been able to amass that is precious and rare, and which has not

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369 583 been distributed for the older children.

a) The Pani (the box). In appearance it may be ordinary or magnificent, according to the aesthetic inclinations of the sisters of the husband. Often it is an old metal box that contained tidbits. In any case it is not the appearance that interests us, but the contents, which generally are:

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12 louis d'or 51;
2 gold necklaces, we say "chains";
2 pairs of gold earrings;
1 or 2 pairs of gold bracelets;
4 or 8 sautoirs, medals of gold which encircle the figure.

[435] The box is found already prepared among the jewelers. Its minimum price is 6,000 francs. Its value easily reaches 20,000 francs and more.

b) The Basket for Effects. This is an expense of recent character and of practical import. Formerly, on the day of [585] the nuptials, the husband gave his wife a bundle of banknotes as personal property accruing to her from her marriage. But the tradition that the woman should be generous made this money disappear immediately, distributed among the persons of caste who came from everywhere. I would have willingly given, if I had known it, the name of the first Saint-Louis man who replaced this packet of money with a quantity of clothing, thus putting his wife in a position to benefit from it herself. The basket actually contains articles whose number and quality vary, but which constitute a veritable trousseau no less, which may last for years. For an individual from a "great family" or a "peasant," it includes as much as:

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12 robes [boubous] of crepe de Chine (of which 4 of 8 meters each are obligatory, 160 francs per meter);
12 robes of rich bazin (4 obligatory of 8 meters each at 225 francs per meter);
4 camisoles, ordinary or of Lagos fabric;
[12] 4 camisoles of crepe de Chine (extravagantly cut to a length of 4 or 5 meters);

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369 583 291 435 12 silk headkerchiefs (6 obligatory, valued at 500 to 600 francs each;
12 kerchiefs with "edging" [mouchoirs de "bord"] (6 obligatory, valued at 300 to 375 francs each);
2 silk handkerchiefs;
4 Mauritanian mats, on which the objects are detailed, valued at 500 francs each, and most of all rare, which costs dearly.

369 685 c) Basket of Small Goods. This is a creation of the well-bred man of Saint-Louis, who during the 3 or 8 or 15 days that the nuptials last wishes the guests to be treated well. The young people of both sexes are supposed to crowd into the spacious rooms, suitably decorated and illuminated, and to be "overwhelmed" by the songs of the griots. The husband considers their rejoicings an imperious duty and offers them a basket generally containing several packs of cards, packages of toothpicks, perfume, razor blades, pipes, tobacco, incense, kohéal, fans, tidbits, etc.

369 585 565 d) The Gifts. These expenses are the final obligations and bear the name of "decorations of castes." As we have noted, since the first visit of the husband, the persons of caste have not officially benefited further from his generosity or from that of his wife. But custom requires that these people be gratified. It should be noted also that the guers have their men of caste who are faithful to them from father to son. In their presence and when they are equal to their task. Whatever their fortune or rank (in the Europeanized society), a guer cannot address any other persons of caste without their permission. [596] Only one coiffeuse arranges the hair of a young girl until her marriage, [302] and one jeweler repairs or makes her finery. [306] The marriage is the ceremony of their dedication and the occasion of proving to them that they have not placed their confidence in vain. These persons comprise two categories: that of the woman and that of the man. Let us note at once that the latter cannot be too demanding without showing a lack of the proper attitude. They form part of the general staff of the husband, and, under penalty

[12 cont.]

369 of humiliation, they must, as must he, show proof of generosity.
585 How does one go about "decorating these persons"?
565 There are the griots, the jewelers, the cobblers, and also ... the captives; the husband gives 1,000 francs or more to each grouping, and his relatives a supplementary sum, always distinct from that given by the husband, of such a nature that each caste receives 10,000 or 20,000 francs or more. This sum will be divided under the direction of the caste head.

585 This ceremony concludes the marriage, because im-
369 mediately, for three streets around, there is nothing but hysteria and hubbub, with griots coming and going, as well as drivers (3).

3. We have not said anything about the expense for the food. Each morning during the whole period of the nuptials, the husband must give a sum large enough to provide food for all of his guests and those of the wife. It is obligatory for the parents of the wife to send supper to the mother of the husband on the first day. I have seen a case that merits being noted. On the occasion of a recent marriage, the parents-in-law sent from Saint-Louis to Louga a wagon of food, 25 large basins, "tolis," containing 25 foods estimated in 1939 at 4,000 francs, deducted from the meals of the mother, which were, it was said, transported by five or six carts.

Consequences of the high price of marriage on the manners and customs

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584 Such expenses greatly hinder young people from marrying.
581 Most of them, if they do not wish to remain single, are obliged to leave their city to contract bush marriages, which are almost

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369 178 [584] [681] [562] always temporary marriages, so great is the attachment of the Saint-Louis man for his city and for the girls of his city. Although this situation is very unfortunate for the boys, it is less so for the girls. Although some of them are still sacrificed very young to rich old men, many wait to meet the young man of their choice before marrying. The marriages of infant girls have become very rare: the girls of Saint-Louis now marry at a [582] reasonable age, at about 20, much like French girls. It is a profound change. Convinced of being obliged to wait a long 369 178 time for a husband, they are acquiring an independence that their mothers have not known; they go out, they go to dances 562 where they dance European dances, they dare to sit at a table [191] in a café, they dress according to their taste, they speak French. They go to school without constraint, which is also a revolution, and they, like the boys, look for a salaried position, which allows them a very broad life, like single persons, and which, within the household, frees them from the guardianship of the [595] husband. Polygamy, which the modern [evoluées] women generally refuse, is more and more rare in Saint-Louis (4).

4. A polygamous husband most often shuns the modern women for the sake of peace in his household, because the personal earnings of these women permit them to [578] buy finery other than that which he periodically distributes to his spouses, and this provokes jealousy and quarrels. Recently a young female official was supposed to enter the home of a Saint-Louis official as the third or fourth wife. She opposed her parents and married according to her inclination.

Educated girls have long been judged quite harshly, but this is passing. Many of the young girls who married against the wishes of their parents have been quickly forgiven when the latter saw the good appearance of the household and the affluence

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369 178 662 [511] that [13] prevailed there. This has been made obvious by the war; the modern households have suffered from economic difficulties much less than the others, because the women proved to be much more skillful in getting out of difficulties with the little that could be obtained.

369 581 [556] Will the custom of such sumptuous expenses with regard to marriage last? It is difficult to tell. It evidently greatly satisfies the pride of the man of Saint-Louis by exhibiting his wealth and his generosity. If it makes marriage difficult for young people, this is very regrettable, because the precious years of youth are lost and the children will come too late; it makes marriage the great affair of one's life, which is good, [562] and it has contributed in a very large measure to the freeing of the girls, which, except for some extravagances, is a great benefit.

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